

"We can't Ever Be Close Again" – Peacemakers Ministry True Story

Rick could not forgive his wife's adultery. Even though Pam had given every evidence of repentance and had begged for his forgiveness, the offense stood between them like a towering wall. (Names have been changed.)

As a Christian, Rick knew that he should forgive Pam. So to appease his conscience, he told her, "I forgive you, but I can't ever be close to you again."

His hollow words only increased their hopelessness. Soon divorce seemed to be the only way to end the pain.

Empty forgiveness

When Rick came to see me a month later and unfolded his story, it was clear that his bitterness was contributing to the destruction of their marriage. His empty "forgiveness" had no power to dispel the memory of Pam's adultery, which was a dark cloud over their relationship.

There was only one genuine way to put the past behind them: true forgiveness—not the meaningless statement that Rick had made to appease his conscience, but the rich, redeeming, thoroughly cleansing forgiveness described in Scripture and modeled by our Lord.

To demonstrate to Rick the hypocrisy of his empty statement, I said, "Rick, imagine that you had just confessed a serious sin to God, and that he responded audibly, saying, 'I forgive you, Rick, but I can't ever be close to you again.' How would you feel?"

After an awkward pause, he replied, "I guess I'd feel like God hadn't really forgiven me."

"But isn't that exactly the way you are forgiving Pam?" I asked. Rick looked at the floor, wrestling for an answer.

The four promises of forgiveness

I continued gently, "Imagine if instead God said, 'Rick, I promise never to think about your sin again, or to dwell on it or brood over it. I promise never to bring it up and use it against you. I promise not to talk to others about it. And I promise not to let it stand between us or hinder our personal relationship.'"

After a long silence, tears began to fill Rick's eyes. "I would know I was completely forgiven... But I wouldn't deserve that kind of forgiveness after the way I've treated Pam."

"Would you ever deserve it?" I asked him. "God's forgiveness is a free gift, purchased for you by Jesus' death on the cross. He doesn't forgive you because you've earned it. He forgives you to display his glory and the riches of his grace. When you truly understand how precious and undeserved his forgiveness is, you will want to forgive Pam the same way he has forgiven you."

"I know I should," he answered, "but how could I ever keep the four promises you just described? I can't imagine forgetting what Pam did! And I just don't feel like I could ever be close to her again."

"Where does the Bible say that forgiveness is forgetting? ... or that it depends on feelings?" I asked. "Forgiveness is an act of the will, Rick, a decision you make in spite of your feelings. Of

course it's hard, especially in a case like this. But if you ask for God's help as you make those four promises to Pam, he will give you the grace to follow through on them."

Forgive to forget

After another thirty minutes of discussion, we prayed together, and Rick's doubts and fears were overcome. An hour later, he met with Pam to confess his sin of bitterness and unforgiveness. When she repeated how sorry she was, he responded with these words.

"Honey, I want to forgive you the way God has forgiven me. With his help, I promise not to dwell on this any more. I promise never to bring it up and use it against you. I promise not to talk to others about it. And I promise not to let it stand between us or hinder our relationship."

Pam fell sobbing into his arms. Rick's commitment to true forgiveness marked the beginning of their healing process. It would take many hours of counseling to address the root causes of their marital problems. But within two weeks, Rick told me that the four promises of forgiveness were really working.

"After I promised not to think about Pam's sin," he said, I realized that the burden had shifted to me. Now when I catch myself thinking about what she did, I confess to God that I am breaking my word. I ask for his help and then focus my thoughts on the immensity of his forgiveness toward me or on Pam's good qualities.

"I praise God for his healing. The negative memories have started to fade, and I am beginning to love my wife again!"